

## [Mary Gilchrist Powell]

Life of Mary Gilchrist Powell, WPA Supervisor

(ex) Welfare Worker - Teacher - Writer-Musician.

Lowndesboro, Alabama

Marie Reese

Lowndes County, Ala.

### MARY GILCHRIST POWELL

Mary Gilchrist Powell - WPA Supervisor, Welfare Worker, Teacher, Writer, Musician, was born 27 years ago at Lowndesboro, Alabama. The home in which she passed the earliest years of her childhood was one of much educational interest and importance in the small village and throughout the county. The Douglas home was one of the foremost that was built when the blue blooded settlers pioneered from the Palmetto States.

They brought with them the cultured and educational influence and when this home was built the traditional one-room school house was built on the lawn nearby. Under this shelter Civil war veterans were taught on the knees of these teachers who were among the first educators in the Black Belt.

As time passed another generation and still another generation were taught their A, B, C's under this "one-room school" roof on College Street. A little story has been passed down the years as to the unique punishment the ante-bellum teacher who instructed the three generations gave her naughty pupils. The story goes that when the rules were broken she would get the small mischief makers in line and wash their mouths out with quinine, and

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when the offense required more punishment they were tied with strings to certain benches prepared for that purpose.

The historic home with the little school house adjacent passed into the hands of the parents of the little golden haired girl - Mary Gilchrist - and "history repeated itself" as it was destined to continue to be an educational center. It was here the present WPA worker Mary Gilchrist Powell was taught her letters and begun her education.

Mrs. Powell, her mother, brushed out the ante-bellum school room and 2 opened up a kindergarten school for the smaller children of the town. The little ones were taught using the Atlanta Georgia (Kindergarten) method and under Mrs. Powell who had a superior training and experience in her vocation. Mary Gilchrist made marvelous progress as a beginner. She received three years training in this school which enabled her to enter Jr. High School at Lowndesboro one year ahead of her age.

Miss Powell is the daughter of Lindsay James and Lucille (Skinner) Powell of Lowndesboro, Alabama. She is descended from a well known and distinguished line of ancestors on both sides of the family. She is the great granddaughter of Archibald Gilchrist who was a pioneer in Lowndes County, and on the Powell side is a direct descendant of the Powell family who "crossed the waters" and were early settlers in New York City and who did much toward its early settlement and development.

The famous block in the great Metropolis on which the widely known Singer Sewing Machine people and Woolworth Store was situated, was at the time of settlement and until a few decades ago owned by that family. There was a 100 years lease on it and at its expiration it was sold for a division. An amusing story was told of the Powell Heir Reunion that was held in that great city at the time of the sale and settlement. Each presenting a claim in the fortune and making attempts to establish their claim. At the time Powells from all over the U.S. were very much in evidence.

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Miss Powell has also a line of distinguished ancestors of the maternal side who were prominently identified with early developments of Marengo County, and who have through the years, been outstanding there in social, education and political circles Her great grandfather, James B. Woolf, was Probate Judge of that county for many years and made himself outstanding in the hearts of the people there during the stormy critical 3 reconstruction period.

He served in that capacity till the county was overrun with Carpet-baggers. The Woolf name was changed as to the spelling, as the original family who immigrated here from the old world spelled it Wolfe - Major General Wolfe, the Hero of Quebec, was a close relative. History in the family and ont is a Hobby with Miss Powell and as a small girl instead of wanting a bedtime story she scrambled up into her grandmother's lap and begged for a historical story. The names of the family tree all their own held a charm for her.

“Oh! tell me again Mammam about my uncle who won the battle of Quebec long long time ago. And again the story was repeated, but never lost its luster to the girl. She was told that Major General Wolfe was related, but many generations removed, nearing 200 years ago.

In that far away time (1759) Canada was the desired object of the struggle and campaign. The great expedition under this worthy and historical young officer left Louisberg to capture Quebec which was considered the Gibraltar of America. He made attempts to storm the heights in front of the City, but it was strongly defended by an army under the command of Montcalm, and his efforts were futile. But from a point farther up the river he embarked his army by night and silently descending the stream, he placed his troops at the rear of the City on the Plains of Abraham.

During the terrific battle which took place the next morning both gallant commanders were mortally wounded. Wolfe lived only long enough to hear of the victory he had won

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and upon the reassurance of the outcome, he exclaimed "Thank God!" I can die happy knowing I won the battle of Quebec."

The French General Montcalm passed the next day and expressed himself as preferring death to seeing his side surrender the City to the enemy.

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As Wolfe floated silently down stream the night previous to the great battle he repeated to the officers about him Grays "Elegy In A Country Church Yard" which was written but a short time before, and when he repeated the words, THE PATHS OF GLORY LEAD BUT TO THE GRAVE." Gentlemen: he said, "I would rather have written those lines than capture Quebec." None were there to tell him "The Hero Is greater than the Poet." The city he captured surrendered five days later. The story of EVANGILINE which Longfellow celebrated in the poem by that name was founded on the cruel incidents of that period.

The small girl begged for that story too as she scanted the fragrance of a love story, but "Mamman" her grandmother, refused on the plea that neither of the lovers in the poem were on the family tree, so she was contented till next time.

The next time she was told the story of Levicy Cook and Thomas Jefferson Woolf who were her great great grandparents and who were the F.F.V's (First Families in Virginia) and were pioneers from Petersburg to this section and made the journey to Jefferson County, La. near the old aristocratic Natchez. It was most interesting to hear the long perilous route made on horse back. The couple making the trip on two horses. A most romantic part of the recital was the attack on the beautiful young maiden Levicy and her sister by the hostile Indians. Back at her home in the primitive days the two girls went to the near by spring in the woodland adjoining their hut. They were attacked by the Indians and in answer to their outcries the gallant young man came to their assistance and rescued her from the Savages.

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The two young people continued their meetings from time to time at the "Block House" and he claimed her hand in marriage as a payment for saving her life. They were married and took their honeymoon on horse back to the fertile lands of the Delta.

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"But Mammam" what is a Block House? I want to know what kind of place my great great "courted" in. You said they met there in the sweetheart days and got married. Some day I will grow up to be a big girls and may have a sweetheart too." Well dear, replied the grandparent, a Block House is made for protection and not for social affairs, but they met there really for safety, but she said love happens when one least expects. Well, the country was new and uncivilized. It was peopled by fierce Indians. There were also white people coming in and both wanted to own the land. Fights occurred often and the white men built large high houses and placed many holes around in it to shoot out of. The house was surrounded by a strong high wall built stockade fashion.

In times of danger the whites for miles around assembled in these strong-holds, and the men stationed themselves at the holes and watched for the approaching of the Indians. Tom Jefferson Woolf and the beautiful bride did not tarry in the rich delta bottoms so long but made another pioneer trip each on horse back but this time a baby boy was added to the pioneer travelers which blessed the union of this young couple. Again the long journey through the perilous country till they reached what is now Dayton, Marengo County, Alabama and decided to pitch their tent there. The wee son was carried there "papoose fashion" and was transferred from the arms of one parent to another in order to rest their tired arms.

The father "blazed" (a term used then to express making a clearing a way toward a location for building a home and cut suitable trees to be used in its construction. A lone one-room hut was the result and while its preparation was going on the young couple camped out in the wilds.

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Levicy was to gain contact the dangerous Red Skins because they were as dangerous and antagonistic in her environments as they had been in her former home. Her husband had to return to the home he had just left to bring 6 possessions that he could not bring the first time, as it was an obvious fact that very little could be conveyed on horse back. He could not carry his wife and baby with him after the possessions for they were a "horse back full", so they were left in the lone log hut in the wildwood. The hardships and terrors of the brave woman could not be described. Through the long cold days and nights she could not have a fire and had to eat cold food because a smoke from the chimney would attract the Indians.

The log cabin was the beginning of Dayton which is and has been through the century, outstanding on account of wealth, culture and educational influence. The town today stands on the location that Thomas Jefferson Woolf blazed through the wild forests back in that far and distant day. A large handsome home on the Vermont, New England type was an old landmark in that town which took the place of the pioneer hut and was the home in later years of the man who founded the town. The son, James B. Woolf, who was for many years Probate Judge, and who helped to shape the destiny of the county his father had founded, was the little baby boy the parents brought there on horse back." "Now tell me what the little Mary Gilchrist said about the kin on Daddy's side and the big College. Oh! yes, replied the mother, you want to hear about the Davidsons.

That family is on the main limb of your tree but the one is six generations older than you are, but the line is direct and has been carefully traced. Gen. William Lee Davidson is the one you want to hear about. He gave the land on which Davidson College, N.C. is built and in appreciation of it the College when founded was named in his honor.

He was a member of one of the oldest and most exclusive organizations in the U.S. "The Society of Cincinnati. To be eligible to its membership, one had to be most distinguished in some way, that is to be so on account personal 7 act or deed. Gen. Davidson distinguished himself for heroic service in Rev. War during in which he lost his life. His

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family down and through the years were noted for their brilliant mental attainments, and many of them became prominent educators in different sections of the southern states. In the flourishing years of the 1850's his neice, Mrs. Mary Davidson, was among the brilliant array of teachers on the faculty of the Lowndesboro Female Institute.

Her lovely character, gentle and cultured manner lives today in the memories of some surviving pupils. In the passing years the little Mary Gilchrist grew away from the Kindergarted school and entered the village school. She was so well prepared that she entered a class ahead of her age and in the years to come she was so studious, she remained ahead.

As a child she was a splendid student and applied herself to her school work and the study of music (piano). In and out of the home she was sweet, pleasant and affable, fond of her school duties, her Sundat School work and her pets. One of her characteristics was her consideration and kindness to older people and the "under-dog". As a small girl she visited the sick and when the other children of the village were indulging in camps and gaities, she and her young brother could be seen carrying some dainty bite to a "shut-in" or going to scatter some of the charm of their younger lives where was gray and drab.

In the school room she was always ready to work a hard "sum" for the little mate that would play instead of "getting" her lessons. There was always around some where a small girl or boy who were not able to have the nice clothes and good things of life and were picked upon and "Kicked about" by the fortunates. These were always befriended by her and her small brother. There lunches were shared with those who could not bring any and often the 8 day after the imposition, Mary Gilchrist would bring n bundle to the little shabby child who wanted to learn in spite of the shabbiness and taunts and in it would be a worn coat, a neat little dress or some things she was willing to divide. At an early age she was quarantined at home with diphtheria and her entertainment was the care of a small kitten which the almost kitten like mother refused to accept responsibility and deserted.

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She nursed and cherished the little pet and named her "Weet." She was so small and soft that the little girl would slip her in the bed and conceal her between the bedding. "Weet" was so pleased with her home and petting and received such good attention that she lived to arrive at the age of 16.

"Pudding", was the name given to Mary Gilchrist by the house hold due to the fact of her sweet, kind and affectionate disposition. "It never sounded sweeter to me than it did the day my father called me and told me I had made the highest mark of any one in my class when we stood the test for the Senior High School entrance." Having completed the required grades at Junior High every student in every school in the county were compelled to stand and pass an examination in order to enter Senior High at Haynesville. Papers were made out at state educational office and were corrected at Superintendent's office. Mary Gilchrist made highest mark. When her father received the message, he approached the house "saying Pudding Powell, you come out ahead." From the home town schools and Haynesville High she continued her education at the Agnes Scott, Decatur, Ga. She was an outstanding pupil there in her collegiate course, as well as in music and was graduated from there with honors.

Her ambition was to teach and soon after graduation she accepted a position as teacher in a large school in the county where she taught three years. However, the confinement of the school room did not agree with her, and she was urged to enter the welfare work. For this she attended the University of Alabama also University of Mississippi, taking course in welfare work at each place. She 9 did welfare work at Birmingham, Alabama also in the Mill Village District at Lanette, Georgia. In May, 1938, Miss Powell was appointed case reader and incestigator on the WPA at Montgomery, Alabama with offices at 200 Commerce Street.

Mary Gilchrist Powell is a young woman of unusual ability. At an early age she displayed a talent for writing and has written several short stories and poems which have been



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published in some of the popular magazines. She is a member of the Presbyterian Church and in her school days was organist for the Sunday School.

She does not "go in" for young peoples frivolities but enjoys good wholesome sports. She is a good horse woman - enjoys tennis and croquet. She is a handsome blonde with fair hair and complexion and has bright and beautiful blue eyes. She is tall and stately and in evening attire she makes a magnificent appearance. Recently Miss Powell has been promoted to supervisor in one of the larger counties of Alabama with 1500 to look after. In her district the extermination of the Pink Worm (& crop destroyer worse than the boll weevil) is one of the large projects.

Her home environments at Lowndesboro are most attractive. Marengo, the home on Main Street is an ante-bellum structure. Its setting is charming with lovely shrubs and flowers and the interior is more charming with its handsome and antique furnishings. She says this home is the "core of my heart" no matter where my business leads me. The parents and one brother, Lindsay James Powell, Jr. constitutes the family. He is a student at Vanderbilt and is the representative that that University has selected to compete for the scholarship to be awarded for European training at an early date.

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